



# Ethical dilemmas facing female teachers in the Arab education system in Israel

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## Abstract

Arab society in Israel is a minority in the process of change. Teachers are at the heart of these processes as agents of progress, education, and integration, while belonging at the same time to a traditional, religious, and patriarchal society that seeks to preserve its identity. The purpose of this study was to examine the ethical dilemmas that Arab teachers in Israel face in teaching students in Arab schools and to understand what considerations and values guide them in making ethical decisions and how they act on them. We interviewed 15 teachers who teach in Arab schools. The findings of the study show that four categories related to ethical dilemmas characterize the work of teachers: an ethics of fairness versus an ethics of care, the neoliberal concept of ethics versus a professional ethics, a cultural ethics versus a professional ethics, and a professional ethics versus an ethics of care. Teachers adopted five key strategies to address these dilemmas: equal treatment, customized teaching, compromise and appeasement, extra effort on the part of the teacher, and collaboration. This research contributes to the growing literature on ethics and education and adds a unique perspective that addresses the ethical dilemmas of teachers in traditional and conservative societies. The findings of the study suggest that the professional ethics of Arab teachers, who in Israel belong to an ethnic minority, should be strengthened.

**Keywords** Teachers · Ethical dilemmas · Arabs · Minorities · Coping strategies

## Introduction

Studies have indicated that teachers find themselves dealing with significant ethical issues in their work, such as the unbalanced allocation of resources, situations where students are treated unequally, and conflicts of loyalty (Bullough, 2011; Ehrich et al., 2011; Gokce, 2013). Teachers respond to ethical dilemmas differently and exhibit different levels of ethical sensitivity. Some deal with such difficulties based on their own values and experiences, and others give preference to general social and moral norms (Mathur & Corley, 2014). Some scholars argue that teachers' values influence their decision-making process and its outcomes by filtering information and defining possible alternatives for solving dilemmas (Nespor, 1987). Ethical dilemmas may be more pronounced for teachers who belong to minority groups with distinct cultures, traditions, religions, or values, which can

add to the ethical complexity that characterizes the profession of teaching (Eyal et al., 2011).

This study was conducted in the context of a socially diverse country, Israel, and focused on an ethnic minority group: Arabs, citizens of Israel who constitute about one-fifth of the population (Arar, 2016). Arab society is largely characterized by a conservative, religious, traditional culture, and by collectivism. At present, however, it is undergoing a process of modernization and integration into the Israeli labor market (Al-Haj, 2012; Arar, 2015), which makes the social status of teachers unique compared to that of other groups in Israeli society.

This study examines the challenges and dilemmas that teachers confront in Arab society, and how they cope with them. Our goal was to understand what considerations guide teachers in making decisions, and how they navigate situations that involve a conflict of values. This research contributes to the growing literature on ethics and education and adds a unique perspective that addresses the ethical dilemmas of teachers in traditional and conservative societies.

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## Theoretical framework

### Different types of ethics

This section introduces five central ethical perceptions that guided our analysis: an ethics of justice, an ethics of care, a professional ethics, a cultural ethics, and neoliberalism as an ethical concept (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). The first four often define the dilemmas that teachers confront, and we investigate how they are reflected in the difficult situations that Arab teachers face (Al-Haj, 2012; Arar, 2015).

#### Ethics of justice

An ethics of justice focuses on rights and laws, and it is part of a liberal democratic tradition. The liberal aspect of this tradition is defined as a commitment to human freedom; the democratic aspect refers to procedures for making decisions that honor the egalitarian sovereignty of the people. This type of ethics deals with conflict between the freedom of the individual and the welfare of the community, and with the possibility of establishing a just and egalitarian society. It proposes that justice reflects the perception of right and that it means fairness in the decision-making process. Ethical decisions must be based on standards such as equality and justice (Öztepe & Onur, 2019).

An ethics of justice originates in a philosophical point of view that deals with the nature of the world and the connection between human beings and their countries. The morality of justice can be classified into two subcategories: fairness and utilitarianism. The first subcategory focuses on the rights of the individual and is based on theories of fairness that state that every person has the right to equal treatment. The goal is to ensure fair treatment for all, based on uniform universal standards that can be applied beyond an individual person or certain circumstances (Rawls, 2020; Simola, 2003). The notion of fairness calls for the reallocation of resources within the existing social structure to ensure individual rights to equal treatment. In the education system, it is expressed as the need to enable procedural fairness, that is, to provide equal educational opportunities and to promote a just social order in school (Enomoto, 1997).

The second subcategory emphasizes the social benefit expected from a particular action and attributes moral value to it. A utilitarian ethics seeks to enhance the public good by maximizing the aggregated utilities of all its members. Utilitarianism thus supports decisions that are beneficial to society as a whole, despite the harm that may result to certain individuals (West, 2004).

In schools, an ethics of justice may be reflected in the legitimation of rights and duties, such as the rights of

parents and students to a “good” education and the duty of teachers to provide it (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Within the liberal tradition, there is great concern not only to make schools more just, that is, to provide equal educational opportunities and allow freedom of belief, but also to educate for this purpose. An ethics of justice highlights teachers’ commitment to school rules and procedures. By contrast, a utilitarian perspective advocates promoting the benefits of the majority of students to increase the aggregate utility (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

#### Ethics of care

Unlike an ethics of justice, which places rights, laws, procedures, and utility at the center of ethical discourse, an ethics of care places emphasis on interpersonal relationships, trust, harmony, on maintaining human dignity and absolute respect for others, on a commitment to people, and on a willingness to accept their right to be themselves (Edwards, 2009; Gilligan, 1982). An ethics of care favors flexibility over firmness and responsiveness over uniformity (Noddings, 1984). It involves taking a particular and concrete action aimed at ensuring the well-being of the parties involved. An ethics of care accounts for the full range of human capabilities: physiological, emotional, intuitive, and empathic (Enomoto, 1997; Hawk, 2017).

For teachers, an ethics of care plays a key role in student–teacher relationships and communication, and it is essential for students’ progress (Hawks & Pillay, 2017). In line with an ethics of care approach, students are at the center of the educational process and need to be encouraged and nurtured, a concept that may go against the grain of those who attempt to make “achievement” the top priority. For Noddings (1992), an ethics of care is the bedrock of all successful education and can revitalize contemporary schooling. An ethics of care requires leaders to consider multiple voices in the decision-making process (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Noddings (2003) argued that the act of teaching should consist of care and at the heart of it should stand the teacher’s commitment to the students’ happiness.

An ethics of care can transform education at all levels because it requires teachers to attend and listen to students’ feelings, evaluate their goals, help them enhance their self-esteem, and grow as participants in caring relationships (Zembylas, 2017). An ethics of care acknowledges that relationships are an integral component outside of teaching that has an impact on student performance in the classroom (Hawk, 2017). Teachers may perceive caring for their students as an integral part of their professional work, but they may find it difficult to maintain the giving of care within different boundaries that exist between themselves and the students, or to understand the connections students make between care and academic support (Ransom, 2020).

## Professional ethics

A professional ethics is a systematic perspective on the practical ideal of conduct in professional work. It is considered a set of values or principles that provide a basis for decisions (Fallahi et al., 2019). It regards teachers as subject to a set of common norms of professional conduct that exist primarily to ensure that they provide the highest quality of public service and responsibly exercise the authority given to them toward society (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016).

According to Campbell (2003), a focus on morality is an integral part of the teaching due to the constant interaction between teachers and students. A professional ethics must therefore form the basis for the behavior of teachers and other educators. The teacher is committed to planning lessons, providing high-quality instruction, and evaluating the learning results. Ideally, teachers are expected to have the ability to perform their roles optimally, which is manifested mainly through excellence in teaching, through unwavering students' needs, maintaining professional relationships with peers, and through active involvement in school everyday tasks (Kusumaningrum et al., 2019).

In terms of teachers' job descriptions, ethical questions may arise concerning the following issues: providing student evaluation, enforcing disciplinary rules, seeking a balance between the welfare of the individual and the general welfare of the class, ensuring the right of students to privacy, encountering tolerance for different worldviews, and in the relationships between teaching staff and parents, and between teachers and their peers (Baratz et al., 2013).

A professional ethics shares some similarities with an ethics of justice (commitment to rules, laws, and rights) and an ethics of care (commitment to students' welfare), and often the line between a professional ethics and other moral judgments may be blurred. Therefore, we identify attribute two main characteristics to a professional ethics: (a) commitment to the school and to the expectations and rules of the Ministry of Education (MOE) (as opposed to commitment to more general principles of fairness and equity), for example, teaching based on the curriculum; and (b) teaching according to teachers' past experience, including relying on past knowledge and training (Eyal et al., 2020).

## Culture and ethics

A cultural ethics acknowledges the contribution of culture, religion, and community to the forming of ethical perspectives. According to a cultural ethics, the community is the main focus of moral agency and the framework within which ethical decisions are often made (Hill-Jackson et al., 2007). A cultural perspective demands acknowledgment of the diversity of communities and its importance for individuals' lives, and it does not prioritize one culture over another. From the

viewpoint of a cultural ethics, our sense of identity derives from our cultural, historical, and religious roots; therefore, respecting individuals means respecting their cultures (Carroll, 2009; Gutmann, 1994).

The education system, and especially teachers, is expected to recognize and respect students' cultural backgrounds by addressing what distinguishes children of minority groups from their peers (Cherng & Davis, 2019). When schools and teachers themselves belong to a minority community, they are likely to turn to the values, beliefs, and desires of their community in making their decisions. The network of beliefs and values that these teachers bring to their practice is rooted in their professional and personal lives alike, and it is not necessarily based on the role they play in any given situation. Religious beliefs are fundamental to the values of many people and may be central to the ethical position of some teachers; these beliefs are part of their experience and deserve attention. Yet, there is little information on how teachers' spiritual views influence their teaching (Barrett, 2015).

## Ethical dimensions of neoliberalism

Neoliberal ideology in education is manifested in the introduction of practicalities and values that place the following at the center of the educational system: marketing, the commercialization of education, choice, the use of selection methods, and the monitoring of schools at the center of the educational system. Among other goals, it has been argued that the ultimate goal of neoliberal reforms is to turn educational systems into markets and to privatize education services as much as possible (Lakes & Carter, 2011). Neoliberalism reduces all social relations to economic relations. In the neoliberal vision, market-based competition constitutes the foundation of society in all fields, including education.

Neoliberalism has redefined the responsibility and role of the state vis-à-vis education. The responsibility for success and failure in education is increasingly perceived not as a public matter but as a private one that includes individuals, their families, and the school (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Competition is considered the desired, and the only path for improving schools. Neoliberal discourse encourages teachers and students to adopt consumer–seller language and practices, and it emphasizes the products and outcomes of the education system and leads to the commodification of the field (Brown, 2003; Davies & Bansel, 2007).

## Literature review

### Ethical dilemmas in teaching

Ethical dilemmas arise when teachers find themselves in complicated situations that require them to choose between

competing sets of values, principles, beliefs, or ideals, pulling them in different directions (Badaracco, 1992; Cranston et al., 2006). Many of the ethical issues professionals face, do not emphasize right versus wrong but may involve right versus right or wrong versus wrong (Hitt, 1990). Ethical dilemmas may result from an event that creates a situation which forces participants to make choices based on competing alternatives. A dilemma cannot be solved by taking one right course of action. Competing alternatives usually involve negative and positive results. The actors in this situation must therefore take an action that is considered morally correct in their eyes, even if it may create a negative outcome for others (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013; Lindqvist et al., 2020).

The education system is an arena fraught with ethical dilemmas. One of the most common issues is manifest in the tension between an ethics of care and an ethics of justice, as expressed in the need to provide personal commitment and care for students on the one hand, and to adhere to formal rules on the other (Bergmark & Alerby, 2006). Another type of ethical dilemma may arise when a cultural ethics, which gives preference to community values, collides with an ethics of justice that demands law-based decisions. Such an issue may appear when liberal norms that emphasize gender equality collide with traditional, and often illiberal, social norms. A different type of ethical difficulty results when professional norms clash with cultural norms and habits, such as gender-based expectations and religious beliefs (Oduol, T., & Cornforth, S. 2019; Christian & Pacino, 2013). Teachers are often required to navigate between students' cultures and communities, on the one hand, and formal MOE instruction, on the other, as in the case of teaching evolutionary theory, which may collide with the religious beliefs of some groups. There may also be tension between a professional ethics and an ethics of care, for example, when the teacher must conduct a fair evaluation of a student's achievement and at the same time address that student's individual needs or distress (Pope et al., 2009; Richardson & Wheelless, 2009).

Often, teachers feel that they are not competent to deal with ethical dilemmas. Many report that they have difficulty in resolving these kinds of issues that they encounter. They have also reported conflicts when minority groups were involved, and in particular, dilemmas around issues of culture and religion (Mungal, 2020).

The literature suggests several ways of dealing with ethical dilemmas. Teachers may accept a problem at face value; ignore it; or address the problem on their own. They can also share such issues with others, for example, seeking advice from senior or experienced staff members; creating institutional structures to prevent actions done by students, teachers or parents that may harm students or staff; expressing their personal and professional ethics and modeling their own behavior to encourage staff members to act ethically;

recognizing ethical dilemmas and the many forces underlying them; engaging in peer education for particular issues (e.g., school code of conduct, conflict management); and developing appropriate preparedness plans and support for teachers through professional development programs (Ehrich et al., 2011; Mahony, 2009; Mungal, 2020).

### Social and cultural characteristics of Arab education in Israel

Arab society in Israel, which constitutes about one-fifth of the population, is characterized by a conservative culture and by collectivism, which emphasizes the well-being of the group (Arar et al., 2016). Arab society has recently undergone political and socioeconomic changes, one of which is the promotion of modernization and education, especially for women. There has been improvement in the quality of teaching, as reflected in the skills of teachers, and a significant increase in the number of females studying at academic institutions (Sinai & Shehade, 2019).

Arab schools serve mostly Muslim students, the language of instruction is Arabic, and most teachers are Arab. Unlike other sectors, Arab education does not enjoy structural autonomy, either budgetary or curricular. The education program is fully supervised by the MOE, and apart from a few adjustments, it is broadly in line with the goals of the curriculum set by the Jewish education system, including the teaching of Jewish history, literature, and Bible studies (Arar & Nasra, 2019). Other subjects, such as math and science, are taught following the national curriculum set by the MOE and are generally compatible with liberal concepts of teaching. Budget allocation to the Arab education system is 20–30% lower than that allocated to Jewish schools. Arab families often see education as the key means to social mobility and personal empowerment. Schools may use hyperindividual discourse to encourage the best students to dedicate themselves to their personal success and survival. The Israeli MOE has no formal code of ethics. Previous policy efforts<sup>1</sup> to promote an ethical code were not pursued, and teachers were thus left to deal with ethical dilemmas without formal guidance (Arar & Abu-Romi, 2016; Arar et al., 2016).

Most research on the ethical perceptions of Arab educators has focused on educational leaders (Arar, 2015, 2016; Arar et al., 2016; Eyal et al., 2020; Halabi, 2021). It has been found that Arab educational leaders are expected to

<sup>1</sup> There were four main suggestions for a code of ethics by (a) 1979—Ha'etzni Committee; (b) 1984—the MOE itself; (c) 1984—one of the teachers' unions (Histadrut Hamorim); and (d) 1998—the Teachers' NGO (see the MOE website at <https://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Staj/PituachMiktzoai/KodEti.htm>). None of these was formally accepted, and all of them are by now outdated.

maintain harmony and loyalty to their culture and identity, even at the cost of sacrificing professional ethics or an ethics of justice. A critical ethics is rarely used and has often been pushed aside because it threatens the social fabric (Arar, 2016). These conditions, then, constitute a fertile ground for creating difficulties and ethical dilemmas for Arab teachers in Israel.

This study focused on Arab teachers and sought to investigate the ethical dilemmas they face. The findings indicate how the five ethical perceptions introduced in the theoretical framework are manifest in the teachers' experience. We also traced the strategies that Arab teachers implement when struggling with these dilemmas.

## Methodology

The research approach is a qualitative case study. Case study research makes it possible to learn about a given topic in the context of a particular time, place, and culture (Yin, 2014). To study the issue of ethical dilemmas confronted by Arab teachers who teach in Arab schools in Israel, we used semi-structured in-depth interviews, which provided the flexibility required for spontaneous interaction with the interviewees. The order of the questions varied between interviews, and clarifying questions were added as the interviews developed and in response to the information provided in the course of the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

## Data collection

After the study was approved by the university ethics committee, we identified the teachers using a snowball sample. Each participant referred us to two more colleagues (Goodman, 1961). We had no former acquaintance with the participants. The interviews were conducted in Arabic by the first researcher, who speaks the language. Due to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted over Zoom. They lasted 45–90 min. All interviews were transcribed in Arabic, then translated into Hebrew to enable validation of the analysis by the second researcher.

Participants were asked to address dilemmas they encountered in their work. They were asked to elaborate on how different factors (school administration, socioeconomic status of the students, parents) shaped these dilemmas (without revealing identifying details), on their considerations, and on the various actors they consulted. We asked interviewees to describe the actions they took.

## Study participants

The sample consisted of 15 teachers who teach in Arab schools, all of them women.<sup>2</sup> The teachers who were interviewed had common characteristics that included belonging to the Arab minority in Israel, and teaching in state and Muslim Arab schools. The teachers were 25–35 years old, and all of them had at least a bachelor's degree, as required by the regulator in Israel (MOE). Eight of the teachers taught in primary schools and seven in high schools. The teachers were from different disciplinary backgrounds: English, mathematics, science, Arabic, and Hebrew, and taught in different schools (primary and high school) (Table 1).

## Data analysis

We analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis, which involves reducing the amount of information in an attempt to focus on certain meaningful aspects, especially those that pertain to the research questions that are to be answered (Schreier, 2014). The preliminary goal was to determine participants' teaching-related dilemmas, that is, situations that teachers perceived as demanding additional reflection and thought. We were interested specifically in teaching-related dilemmas in which teachers choose a path of action after reflecting on it. We found 61 events that met these criteria. Next, we read the events and analyzed them based on the five ethical perceptions described in the theoretical framework (Huberman & Miles, 2002). This stage was conducted by each author separately, after which we compared our analyses and discussed cases where the analyses did not match (Bernard et al., 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

When examining teachers' coping strategies, we identified similar courses of action. After capturing the essence of each solution, we grouped those that shared similar characteristics and classified them into codes. Examples of inductive codes that emerged at this stage were equal treatment, customized teaching, and teachers' extra effort (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

## Ethical aspects

We obtained informed consent for the research from participating teachers after we explained and clarified the objectives of the research to them. During the interviews, each interviewee was allowed to refuse to answer questions, to

<sup>2</sup> We chose to interview only women because they are the majority of teachers in the Arab education system and in order to control for gender differences that may exist with regard to ethical dilemmas (CBS, 2019).

**Table 1** Participants

Interview No	Discipline (expertise)	Age	Experience (No. of years)	School
1	Hebrew	35	12	Primary
2	Arabic	34	11	Primary
3	Arabic	33	10	Primary
4	Sciences	26	2	Primary
5	English	25	2	High School
6	Mathematics and Communications	26	2	High School
7	Mathematics and Computers	34	4	High School
8	Biotechnology, Chemistry, and Biology	35	13	High School
9	English	27	2	Primary School
10	Arithmetic, Computers, and Geography	35	10	Primary School
11	Arabic, Hebrew, and English	28	5	Primary School
12	Sciences	32	9	High School
13	Mathematics and Computers	27	2	High School
14	English	26	3	Primary School
15	Arabic and Hebrew	34	5	High School

**Table 2** Frequency of ethical dilemmas

Categories of dilemmas	Prevalence of dilemma category	Number of teachers reporting the dilemma
Ethics of fairness vs. ethics of care	34 (55.7%)	15 (100%)
Neoliberal concept of ethics vs. professional ethics	11 (18%)	7 (46.6%)
Cultural ethics vs. professional ethics	9 (14/7%)	7 (46.6%)
Professional ethics vs. ethics of care	7 (11.4%)	7 (46.6%)

speak without being quoted, or to withdraw from the study. The teachers were promised complete anonymity, and we took measures to maintain the participants' anonymity after the text was transcribed and during the publication stage.

### Study limitations

We interviewed teachers who teach in both primary and high schools. Our findings did not indicate significant differences between the two levels of education, but a study based on an additional and larger sample is needed to further investigate possible differences. The last limitation regards fluency in Arabic. Only the first author was a speaker of Arabic. Therefore, to validate our analysis, we translated the interview transcripts into Hebrew. We are aware that some subtleties may have been lost in translation.

### Findings

We analyzed the interviews using categories and criteria derived from the data themselves as well as categories derived from the literature. Teachers were asked to relate situations in which they encountered challenges

and problems in their work as educators. The dilemmas raised by the teachers were categorized according to the dominant ethics they raised: an ethics of care, a cultural ethics, a professional ethics, an ethics of justice, and neoliberalism.

We identified four main categories of ethical dilemmas: an ethics of fairness versus an ethics of care, the neoliberal concept of ethics versus a professional ethics, a cultural ethics versus a professional ethics, and a professional ethics versus an ethics of care. The prevalence of the dilemmas is shown in Table 2.

We identified five key strategies teachers used for solving ethical dilemmas:

1. Customized teaching—the teacher chooses to deal with a dilemma by customizing their teaching to a specific student's needs.
2. Extra effort—the teacher overcomes a dilemma by investing more of her time.
3. Equal treatment—to avoid giving “special treatment” to one student, the teacher chooses to address all students in the same manner.
4. Collaboration—the teacher looks for external support to back her decision by collaborating with colleagues.

**Table 3** Frequency of five key strategies for solving ethical dilemmas

Strategies	Number dilemmas that include the strategy	Number of teachers reporting having used the strategy
1. Customized teaching	35 (47.94%)	15 (100%)
2. Teachers' Extra Effort	15 (20.54%)	7 (46.66%)
3. Equal treatment	8 (10.95%)	6 (40%)
4. Collaboration	9 (12.32%)	6 (40%)
5. Compromise and appeasement	6 (8.21%)	5 (33.33%)

5. Compromise and appeasement—the teacher tries to find middle ground in the conflict and looks for compromises.

We found that teachers often use more than one strategy when facing dilemmas, and use them simultaneously (Table 3).

### Areas of ethical dilemmas and considerations involved in decision-making

#### Ethics of fairness versus ethics of care

Teachers shared dilemmas in which they were required to decide between an ethics of justice, which entailed treating all students fairly, and an ethics of care, which entailed giving personal treatment and tailored responses to students. Such dilemmas are exacerbated in the case of teachers who belong to a minority group (Arar, 2016). First, academic achievement has a crucial bearing on the future of children and their ability to integrate into the main society. Second, Arab society is poor and weakened, and there are many cases of students facing significant difficulties.

The dilemmas that arose from the tension between care and fairness were reflected in two main areas of the teachers' experiences:

- Providing equitable classroom management—striking a balance between the needs of the majority of students in the classroom and those of the individual.
- Taking affirmative action—dealing with the tension between fairness in grades and consideration of disadvantaged individuals.

#### Equitable classroom management

The dilemmas regarding equity in managing the classroom reflect the teachers' deliberation regarding the fair distribution of time and attention among students in the same class. Most teachers ( $N = 11$ ) were aware that fair treatment of students was not necessarily expressed in an equal distribution of time and attention among them, but

rather that they were required to consider each student and his or her unique needs. At the same time, teachers found it difficult to strike the right balance between the needs of the classroom as a whole and those of individuals, and between the requirement to provide a semblance of equality and to give an individual response to students with unique difficulties, as seen in this description of a teacher's dilemma:

I had a hyperactive student with various problems, who couldn't sit still in his chair. On one hand, I'm supposed to deliver the lesson properly. But sometimes I cannot do it at all, because I'm supposed to connect the student to the class so that he can integrate at least to the little extent to which he is capable. I have to explain to the class why he's allowed and they're not. I don't wish to treat students differently. I want to behave fairly toward everyone, but to what extent do I sacrifice the whole class for the sake of one child? It is a very difficult decision. (Interview 3, primary school)

Teachers felt obligated to respond differently to students with special needs (Interviews 1–5, 8–12, 14), but when they sought to apply this concept in practice, they found it difficult to judge the fairness of their actions. Teachers tended to interpret fairness as equal treatment and as a response to the majority of students. By contrast, an ethics of care guided teachers to consider each child's needs individually.

The teacher chose to deal with the dilemma described above through providing the student with individual tasks, a strategy that required additional effort and work on her part: "I had to give him a lot more attention, to give him more tasks" (Interview 3, primary school). This choice included a combination of two strategies by the teacher: providing customized teaching and making extra effort to devise the additional tasks and verify them.

I have a student who has a stuttering problem... the student is very shy, he didn't pay attention at all during classes... On the one hand, I know he has a problem, and on the other hand, I want him to overcome his fears and shyness, but I feared the other children would embarrass him or mock him during his participation. (Interview 2, primary school)

In this case, the teacher was vacillating between employing an ethics of care and an ethics of justice. She wanted the student to participate in class on equal terms with others but worried that he might be hurt in the process. The solution she found was customized teaching. She allowed the student to participate in class from a place of strength:

I told myself I should talk to him... and suddenly I found out that this student is an “a world on its own...” He raises different animals like rabbits, sheep, chickens, horses... I found out that the student speaks well when he feels confident... I decided that he would choose an animal he liked to bring to school and tell the students and teachers about it... The student was very happy, all the students stood around him... and he explained to them about the animal... I also decided to give him a certificate of recognition and encourage him in the class by raising his grades. (Interview 2, primary school)

### Affirmative action

All the teachers who participated in the study ( $N=15$ ) have identified unique circumstances in the lives of the students that make it difficult for them to demonstrate their learning abilities. On the one hand, teachers feel obligated to treat all students according to the same standards; on the other hand, the teacher does not want to “coldly” weigh the students’ achievements and ignore the difficulties they are facing. When the framework of treating all students equally is set aside, teachers may find it difficult to define the meaning of fairness to them. There are times when these aspirations make it challenging for teachers to determine when it is fair to continue to give a student special opportunities and treatment, and when this may hurt the other students, as demonstrated by the following teacher:

In another situation, the mother of a student had cancer and was in the hospital. The student’s father spends most of his time with the mother. I know that there are no parents at home to sit with the student, check her homework, or help prepare her for exams. I know I must give her special attention. I want to support and help her, especially because she’s going through a difficult time. The students, however, resented the fact that I treat her differently... I must make it easier for her and give her a chance to get a good grade. Nevertheless, I need to behave equitably toward the rest of the students and treat everyone uniformly. This is not an easy situation. (Interview 7, high school)

Even when teachers are required to balance both upholding academic standards and caring for a student, fairness is interpreted as meeting uniform requirements in a way that

is consistent with neoliberal ideas of equal treatment. When dilemmas are framed within an ethics of care, if students are having family problems, the teachers may feel that they have a responsibility to help them to learn and succeed despite their circumstances. Teachers want to take into account the unique circumstances and aspects of every student, to respond to the students’ wishes, understand them, and help them. Although teachers expressed satisfaction with their approaches after giving special attention to some students, it was accompanied by doubts about the justification for demonstrating a preference for these students in dealing with their particular situations, and by pangs of conscience concerning the rest of the students in the class.

Similar to the previous example, in the case of the ill student described above, the teacher chose a strategy of providing customized teaching and making extra effort. She assumed responsibility for the student’s success despite her complex personal circumstances: “I also decided not to give her homework, and during the exams to give her private lessons to prepare her and to make it easier for her on the exams, to support her in her grades” (Interview 7, high school).

### Neoliberal concept of ethics versus a professional ethics

Teachers’ commitment to professional standards and school policies can conflict with neoliberal concepts that have spread throughout Arab society in Israel (Pinson & Agbaria, 2015). Teachers ( $N=7$ ) recognized the right of parents to participate to some extent in school decision-making processes. However, teachers found it difficult to defend their professional positions against this type of intervention (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 9, 10, 11, 14).

There is another thing about scoring tests and assignments. When there are demanding parents, they constantly put me under pressure because they want their son to get a perfect score. Sometimes I check the tests and assignments more than once; sometimes I hesitate when there is a mistake and I have to subtract points. I know that the parents will ask me why I took off points for such a small mistake. However, I cannot give full credit for a wrong answer. It’s another thing when I decide to take off only half a point, and they say, “wow, you take off half a point and give a score like 98.5... it makes no sense... you’re stingy...” In all these cases I find myself in a loop that I don’t know how to get out of... It’s not so easy to convince parents... In the end, I used a gauge on how to assess the students and what points to deduct. I had to convince my fellow teachers to work according to it so that there would be no difference in the assessments... (Interview 1, primary school)



As we have shown above, student assessment is a charged and sensitive issue in Arab society, where education for Arabs in Israel is employed as a mechanism for social mobility and economic integration. This situation has led to multiple interventions by parents seeking to secure the future of their children.

The teacher in the interview above adopted a variety of strategies to cope with the difficulty she faced. First, she used a strategy involving considerable and meticulous work, which resulted in an increased workload and in repeatedly examining assignments and tests. A second strategy was one entailing compromise and gratification, deducting half points or subtracting points symbolically in order not to antagonize the parents on the one hand and to retain the teacher's professional integrity on the other. Eventually, the teacher came up with a solution that favors a professional ethics and is based on collaboration. Together, with the school counselor the teacher was able to provide an answer (using a gauge) based on a perspective of professional ethics:

I saw that there is a disabled student in the class who needs to be formally recognized as such. I know this issue is not easy for parents "in Arab culture." I met with the counselor and we decided we must talk to the parents about the issue. The parents completely refused... Had the parents agreed for the student to be recognized as disabled, he would have been entitled to benefits that would have made it easier for him in school. But the parents refused because they didn't want their son to have a "stigma," that is, to be in "special education." (Interview 3, primary school)

As the above example illustrates, the teacher felt professionally obligated to act for the benefit of the child. At the same time, she anticipated the parents' resistance, which she attributed to cultural norms that she was familiar with. Her professional judgment had to give way to cultural considerations. The teacher chose the strategy of making extra effort to bridge the gap: "I decided to give him individual lessons, to encourage him during the lesson, to help him with his assignments and tests" (Interview 3, primary school).

### Cultural ethics versus a professional ethics

Teachers are often required to balance their professional ethics and the requirements of the MOE with their own religious and cultural customs and with traditional expectations in Arab society (Al-Haj, 2012). Teachers have multiple ethical obligations. They see themselves on the one hand as agents of change and progress, and on the other hand, have a strong sense of belonging and identification with their communities and culture. Arab schools in Israel are characterized by religious conservatism (Arar, 2015). One of the common dilemmas ( $N=7$ ) for teachers had to do with the

extent to which it was appropriate to expose their students to Western culture, and the degree to which they should take action to strengthen the students' sense of belonging to Arab society within the State of Israel. It is important to note that the interviewees considered both cultures as important for the students' identity, and as contributing to their development and functioning in the world around them. Few teachers expressed a commitment to encouraging a modern pluralistic outlook in their students. At the same time, they expressed concern that the teaching of liberal and universal Western concepts would harm the positive perception of the traditional lifestyle that the school and the parents sought to advance. The teachers emphasized the expectations of the school and the parents, seeing themselves as their representatives, and therefore tended to express less openly their private positions.

There are easy experiments in chemistry... like the "synthesis of sugars in alcoholic beverages."... I know that in the religion of Islam it is forbidden to drink alcohol, beer, or wine... but this is a scientific experiment that indicates an extensive understanding of the subject. At the same time, I don't want to face the dilemma as if I am encouraging a conflict that may get in the way of the students' religious beliefs. (Interview 8, high school)

In this case, a ban in Islam against the drinking of alcohol conflicts with the way the teacher perceives her professional role. Teachers view such a conflict as requiring them to be extra careful in their teaching methods (Interviews 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15). There are cases in which teachers have had to reject certain parts of the curriculum material in order not to offend the cultural values of the students. The teacher in the interview above went on to say:

I still wanted to teach it, but very carefully. When I started teaching this subject in class, one student argued that this subject should not be taught. I told her that we are only studying the subject and not making alcohol. In another class, I had to show an animation about the making of beer, but before and after class I emphasized that we are religiously forbidden to make or drink beer. In other classes, I had to give up on this subject. (Interview 8, high school)

In the above case, the teacher chose to customize instruction to overcome the tension between culture and a professional ethics and taught a different set of lessons in each classroom to tailor the material to the cultural perceptions of the students.

I would like to teach the subject of "evolution" in biology. I know that this subject is opposed to the religious beliefs of the students, and the students are opposed

to studying it. Sometimes I give up on this topic and don't teach it. Once, I wanted to expose the students to different theories, even if they don't believe in them. I thought it is appropriate to start on this subject religiously, to see what is meant in our religion, how God created man... After class, one of the students asked me if I was secular. Do I believe in God? It is important to teach this subject after the students know me well. (Interview 8, high school)

In this case, the teacher had to cope with a conflict between a professional ethics and culturalism. She appears to have been torn between the professional obligation to teach according to the curriculum and her religious commitment. Choosing to take an approach based on a professional ethics might have a negative impact on her image in the community. The teacher dealt with the dilemma by customizing her instruction strategy: she approached the topic from the religious point of view and addressed evolution only after establishing a religious background.

### Professional ethics versus an ethics of care

Teachers were committed to the students' academic success ( $N=7$ ). Whenever students failed to reach their potential, an ethics of care led teachers to support them. At the same time, teachers sought to ensure that their assessment was fair, in the sense that it faithfully reflected the students' knowledge and ability and demonstrated a commitment to the academic and professional standards set by the MOE.

These aspirations make it difficult for teachers to decide when it is professionally dishonest to grant students additional opportunities to improve their achievement and when it is appropriate to give them a final grade, even if it is to the student's detriment. The teacher in the interview explains:

There was a case where I had a student who studied hard, was diligent, and constantly participated in class, but didn't get a high grade. I knew... that if I didn't change her grade, it would harm her. But I couldn't give her a different grade because I didn't want to behave unprofessionally and unfairly toward the other students. (Interview 1, primary school)

In this case, commitment to one student's success collides with the teacher's obligation to professionally assess students' achievement. Teachers seem to consider students' academic success as crucial for their well-being (Interviews 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13). Therefore, they seek to prevent, as much as possible, failure on the part of the students and to give them repeated opportunities to succeed, as the teacher quoted above went on to say in her interview:

To improve her grade, I had to include a 20-point bonus question on the test. That way, the student received a

good grade and all the other students received the same chance to improve their grades. Thus, I behaved fairly, and all the students got what they deserved. (Interview 1, primary school)

Caring about students' academic fate and believing that their life can still be changed for the better are at odds with the teacher's obligation to recognize their accomplishments according to formal standards. Preserving the teacher's professional integrity is seen as conflicting with the teacher's concern for the fate of the students and the desire to protect them from failure.

In this case, the strategy adopted by the teacher was treating everyone equally, which also required extra effort on her part. She chose to give all the students a second chance, in order to allow one student to improve her grade. This solution enabled the teacher to assess all students according to the same standards.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the ethical challenges and dilemmas that teachers experienced in their work with students in Arab schools in Israel and how the teachers dealt with these issues. The findings indicate that the most common dilemma concerned the tension between an ethics of fairness and an ethics of care. All the teachers faced situations and dilemmas in which their concern for a particular student conflicted with their desire to treat all students equally. This finding is consistent with those of other studies that investigated ethical dilemmas of Jewish teachers in Israel (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Shapira-Lischshinsky & Orland-Barak, 2009). The dominance of an ethics of care in teaching is reflected in many studies that have observed teachers' ethical stands (Ehrich et al., 2011; Tirri & Husu, 2002). This study's findings show that teachers who teach underprivileged children of minority groups experience a strong commitment to the well-being of their students and their future.

The next most common dilemma was related to the pull between neoliberalism and a professional ethics. This conflict to the central place that neoliberal concepts occupy in Arab society in Israel. Neoliberalism, which emphasizes individual success, offers an opportunity for social integration for the talented few. This meritocratic concept often takes the form of constant pressure directed at teachers by parents. Often, teachers themselves share similar beliefs regarding the significance of school achievement and struggle to decide between these beliefs and their professional judgment (Sabbagh, 2019).

As with many other minorities, and especially in the context of the acute socioeconomic discrimination in minority

education, Arab society perceives education as the central means of social mobility and individual empowerment. This also explains the teachers' commitment to students' individual success and their willingness to invest a great deal of effort into not harming their chances of achieving academically (Pinson & Agbaria, 2015). Teachers have adopted the neoliberal ethos according to which the success of individuals is based on effort and ability, and serves as a means of integrating a minority into general society. At the same time, their collective commitment to the professional group to which they belong creates a practice committed to the success of every student.

We found that the dilemma between culturalism and a professional ethics was third in frequency. The tension between culturalism and professionalism also reflects the gap between the expectations of the local community and those of the MOE. The cultural perspective is embedded in teachers' everyday work. Yet, this study shows that the cultural perspective can lead to dilemmas when it conflicts with professional requirements. In these circumstances, the role of teachers as agents of change, navigating between tradition and progress and between segregation and integration, presents the greatest challenge to teachers. Teachers are conflicted between these two ethical perspectives.

In these situations, teachers must put a great deal of effort into managing dilemmas and conflicts within their schools. The literature suggests that conflicting ideologies are a main source of dilemmas and of teachers wavering in their decision-making process (Christian & Pacino, 2013; Davies & Heyward, 2019; Ding & Wang, 2018). There is tension in teachers' work between their commitment to universal values and to traditional values (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). It is also evident that teachers are committed to serving as a bridge between these two worlds and to acting as agents of change. However, the present study shows that teachers exercise extra caution in dealing with cultural dilemmas. This finding is supported by previous studies that have found that teachers in a collective society attach great importance to the social components of their work (Barrett, 2015). Consequently, teachers are likely to favor the values, beliefs, and desires of the community in their decision-making over a professional ethics (Arar, 2015; Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Eyal et al., 2011).

Last, teachers faced a dilemma between a professional ethics and an ethics of care. This tension was also found in the case of Jewish teachers (Shapira-Lischshinsky & Orland-Barak, 2009). Professional standards often require teachers to adhere to formal instructions and protocols, such as in testing and grading students. At the same time, teachers may feel obligated to respond to the individual needs and circumstances of students. This dilemma was the least common because often teachers understand caring as part of the profession of teaching and do not see a contradiction

between applying an ethics of care and a professional ethics. In this respect, teachers adopt Noddings' perception, according to which the act of education is one of caring (Noddings, 2003).

Teachers presented five key strategies for solving dilemmas: equal treatment, customized teaching, compromise and appeasement, extra effort on behalf of the teacher, and collaboration. Equal treatment, customized teaching, compromise and appeasement, and extra effort on the part of the teacher are strategies that allow teachers to avoid making a clear resolution between the two ends. They allow the teacher to "have their cake and eat it too," and in this way, avoid conflict. This reinforces Rogers and Webb's (1991) conclusions that an ethics of care is not merely about protecting students in school nor showing concern their future; rather, it first and foremost involves taking practical actions in teaching situations and everyday choices.

Only the last strategy, collaboration, reflects the teachers' attempt to give preference to professional ethics. However, teachers need the support of their colleagues to pursue this approach.

Teachers may doubt their ability and right to properly evaluate their students and rarely stand up to parents who question their professional authority (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2016). Teachers seldom have the confidence to rely on their professional expertise, intelligence, and morality. Reading "between the lines," the teachers' responses in the interviews create the impression that although they know how they would like to act, in the absence of an external source to justify and support their action, they prefer to claim uncertainty, adopt a pluralistic-relativistic position, as if there was no "right" and "wrong," and take cover behind a cautious exercise of authority (Baratz et al., 2013). It also seems that exercising extreme has to do with the perception of the role of the teacher as nonautonomous.

Teachers avoiding of relying on a professional ethics in decision-making has several implications. First, it harms the status of the profession due to the extra work that teachers must undertake in trying to cope with various dilemmas. The extra work, which is not paid or rewarded, undermines the professionalism of teachers and their social ranking. Eventually, this method of dealing with issues increases teachers' burnout. Second, giving priority to individual decisions over those based on fairness undermines professionalism by replacing rules, transparency, and consistency with custom-tailored personal decisions.

Another explanation for the weak status of a professional ethics is the continued decline in the standing of teachers in Israel (Bogler, 2005; Dolton & De Vries, 2019). According to this explanation, the decline in the social status of teaching professionals has led to the internalization of doubt and criticism by teachers and has deepened ethical dilemmas, and has undermined teachers' resilience in facing these

dilemmas. These doubts have led them to adopt a strategy of compromise and appeasement at the expense of professional ethics.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that the professional ethics of Arab teachers, who in Israel belong to an ethnic minority, should be strengthened. Teachers gain knowledge and awareness of the ethical aspects of their work and develop reflective abilities as they encounter ethical dilemmas. Ethical knowledge can provide teachers with a more meaningful sense of professionalism and serve as a basis for revitalizing school culture, in which the moral dimensions of all aspects of the teachers' work are discussed.

In minority societies, in particular, it is important to establish a school community that allows teachers to share dilemmas they face and reach solutions based on coordination and collaboration. This measure can reduce teachers' sense of isolation and allow them to strengthen their professional foundation in dealing with students and parents.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Ethical approval** This study was approved by the Open University in Israel, Department of Education and Psychology Ethics Committee (Approval No. Z1767).

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation. The consent was audio-recorded.

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